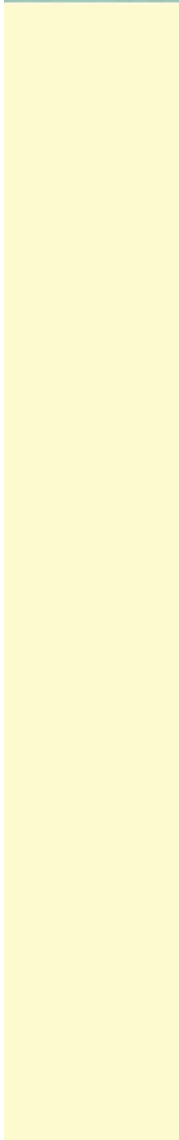


# SECTION 3

## Public Input Process



# Public Input Process

## Overview

One of the key objectives expressed by the Columbia County Recreation and Leisure Services Department for conducting a master plan study was to gain a clear understanding of public opinion and desires regarding facilities and programs. Gathering public input was an important component in the master planning process that provided the planning team with the basis on which to formulate recommendations. Input was obtained in a variety of different forums including: interviews of all Recreation and Leisure Services Department staff, key government employees, community leaders, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board members and other community recreation providers.

A citizens' steering committee was formulated, made up of volunteers from the community who participated in a full day workshop. A user survey was distributed in January of 2002, providing the opportunity for approximately 6,000 area residents to offer opinions about community parks and recreation. In addition, public meetings were conducted in October 2001, offering residents the opportunity to come out and speak on issues that were important to them. Other comments were received via e-mail and mail-ins, completing the public input process and providing a full inventory of public opinion. The following narrative provides a summary of the various phases of the input process.

## Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is an analysis of how the Recreation and Leisure Services Department currently functions and the way it should function in the future. In order to arrive at a realistic understanding of existing conditions and community expectations, a variety of techniques has been employed including: direct observation of facilities; review of relevant planning documents and background information; interviews with key staff, officials and park proponents; public meetings; and a user survey.

## Citizens' Steering Committee

Representatives of community groups and interested citizens were invited to join a citizens' steering committee by Columbia County. These people reflect the diverse demographics of the county; many hold responsible positions in the community and are active proponents of recreation. The Citizens' Steering Committee consists of 24 individuals dedicated to providing their fellow citizens with the highest possible quality of recreation opportunities. The Committee's initial responsibility was to participate in a planning workshop focused on identifying baseline data including perceived community needs and prioritization for implementation. Following the workshop, committee members were asked to act as ambassadors for the project by helping to educate their friends and neighbors about the critical importance of parks and recreation in the community. Additionally, representatives of the steering committee attended and participated in a series of public meetings held throughout the county.

## **Citizens' Steering Committee Workshop**

On July 27, 2001, the Citizens' Steering Committee participated in an all-day planning workshop facilitated by Lose & Associates. The committee broke into three discussion groups to focus first on three critical questions. The questions and subsequent answers from each discussion group are listed below:

### ***Question 1. What are the five most critical issues facing the Recreation and Leisure Services Department?***

#### **Group 1**

- Land acquisition (multiple locations)
- Funding for new facilities
- Meeting needs of all people with different interests
- Growth management
- Updated existing facilities

#### **Group 2**

- Growth
- Lack of staff
- Facilities and locations
- Maintenance and up-keep
- Funding

#### **Group 3**

- Funding (programs, venues, etc.)
- Growth (facilities, programs, etc.)
- Land availability
- Politics (locations, multi-county efforts)
- Communication/awareness
  - To public
  - Neighboring departments
- Co-op ventures
  - Sports organizations/public
  - B.O.E./County
  - Cluster
  - Taxes pay
  - No more O & M

#### **Committee Consensus**

- Growth
- Land Related
- Funding and priorities
  - Co-op
  - Passive Recreation
- Lack of staff
  - Provide all "beneficial" activities to all ages, especially health and wellness
  - Quality of life

Question 1. summary – all three groups listed funding as an issue facing the recreation department. Growth and property development were also mentioned, as well as the lack of staff and meeting the needs of the community.

***Question 2. What are the strengths of the Recreation and Leisure Services Department's organization, programs and facilities?***

**Group 1**

- Organization
- Willing to learn, listen, grow and change (e.g.: this meeting and their attendance)
- Programs
  - Youth (sports)
  - Independence Day and Back to School
- Facilities
  - Well maintained (those that are well utilized)

**Group 2**

- Youth sports
- Staff and leadership
- Community support/volunteers
- Integration of communities

**Group 3**

- Staff – Pro/Advisory Board/Coaches
- Youth sports/programs
- Equipment
- Diversity – Programs and Facilities

**Committee Consensus**

- Youth sports
- Staff (volunteers)
- Special events
- Maintenance
- Diversity
- Willingness to grow and change
- County leadership on same page
  - Commission
  - Management

Question 2. summary – absolutely the strongest suit of the county's offerings is in youth athletics – specifically baseball and softball. The staff was also praised for its willingness to grow and change and the commission and management for their cooperation.

***Question 3. What are the weaknesses of the Recreation and Leisure Services Department's organization, programs and facilities?***

**Group 1**

- Communication (w/public) awareness
  - Newsletter
  - More publicized website
  - On-line reg. (optional)
- Programs
  - Diversity of activities
  - Programs located within same park
- Facilities
  - Not utilized fully – e.g. community centers
  - Facility variety

**Group 2**

- Funding
- Flexible hours for staff to better use facilities. Facilities should be used six days a week. Additional practice facilities are needed.
- Maintenance is needed to keep facilities updated and well kept (flushable toilets).
- Recruit and retain staff
- Marketing of the program to advertise the diversity

**Group 3**

- Adult sports
- Improvement in communication - public knowledge of programs and facilities being offered
- Media coverage
- Parking/access roads
- Water park facilities – grant natural resources
- Lack of alternative sports complexes – bike trails, roller blade park
- Lack of practice facilities – basketball courts, soccer fields
- Improved officiating
- Balance priority sports

**Committee Consensus**

- Communication and marketing
- Lack of diversity in programs and facilities
- Utilization of facilities
  - Including schools for practice and multi-use of fields
- Lack of practice facilities
- General maintenance
  - Staff retention
  - Parking (inadequate)
  - Officiating (need training)
- Enforce design standards and construction of new facilities

Question 3. summary – The consensus of the discussion groups was that the department does not have a very diverse offering of program options, and the options it does have are not communicated well to the public. Issues were also brought up regarding staffing, maintenance and practice facilities.

The discussion also included a brainstorm session to determine programming and facilities needs. The following charts show the tallies from all three groups and the final ranking for each:

	Group	Group	Group	Final
Programs:	One	Two	Three	Ranking
Expand Youth Sports	1	1	1	1
Education - Tennis, Golf, Swimming	5	3	3	2
Expand Adult Sports	9	2	2	3
Special Events e.g. Health Fairs	4	7	4	4
Concerts	3	8	5	5
Volleyball (indoor/outdoor)	6	6	6	6
Crafts/Arts	8	5	9	7
Education - e.g. Genealogy	2	12	10	8
Archery	10	9	8	9
Gymnastics	12	4	11	9
Horseback Riding	11	10	7	11
Drama	7	11	12	12

	Group	Group	Group	Final
Facilities:	One	Two	Three	Ranking
Trails/Greenways (walking/biking/horseback)	2	1	1	1
Improve Existing Facilities	1	4	5	2
Alternative Sports Complex	13	3	3	3
Soccer Complex	17	2	2	4
Neighborhood Parks (playground)	3	10	9	5
Aquatics Center	8	8	7	6
Outdoor Pavilion	4	11	8	6
Family Parks (passive)	5	5	15	8
Improve Wildwood Park	15	9	6	10
Gymnastics Facility	9	6	16	11
Archery Range	10	12	14	12
Golf Course	18	11	7	12
Public Shooting Range (skeet, trap)	11	13	12	12
Equestrian Center	13	12	16	15
Community Playhouse Concert Hall	7	18	17	16
Model Plane Airport (remote control car track)	14	14	10	16
Ice Rink	16	15	18	17
Civic Center	6	17	4	18

## Public Meetings

The results of the Citizens' Steering Committee workshop were presented in three public meetings in late October of 2001. The discussion and suggestions of the citizens that attended these meetings are as follows:

### ***Savannah Rapids Pavilion, October 29, 2001***

General discussion/comments:

- One attendee stated that the locations of many of the park facilities and programs were not convenient.
- Increase recreation opportunities beyond team sport activities – add bike trails, jogging paths, additional small meeting/activity rooms, shaded picnic areas and add after school park programs.
- Add youth camp programs, summer camps at Wildwood Park; day camps that will be affordable to different economic levels.
- Add canoeing programs or rentals.
- Add limited public transportation to help bring the citizens to the park programs and facilities. "Mobile recreation" – using old school busses to take recreation to the population centers.
- Sidewalks should be required in subdivisions – the parks department should help to get the public involved in passing sidewalk ordinances.
- Connect subdivisions with walking/biking paths.
- Competition with private enterprise was discussed. Citizens want to ensure that the county parks department does not directly compete with services and facilities offered in the private sector.
- Outdoor programming for seniors.
- Outdoor programming to include rope courses, hiking, canoeing (county-provided rental equipment), camping (county to rent equipment) and a climbing wall.
- Need a publication for Columbia County residents that will describe parks and recreation programs and facility offerings.
- Use school property for health and fitness programs.
- Partner with schools for satellite facilities and program options.
- Add a youth summer retreat camp with workshop/craft programs, nature programs – use Wildwood and add pavilions and separate lodging (camp) spots. Add day camps at varying cost levels.
- Add open space for "walk-up" activities.
- Add a dog park to the park system.
- Add a nature center near Euchee Creek.
- Add more shaded seating areas in the parks, more shade structures and large trees throughout parks.
- Add aquatics facilities – pool, "splash-ground", or interactive water fountains and programming to accompany these new facilities.

### ***Columbia County Municipal Auditorium, October 30, 2001***

Facilities discussion:

- BMX Facility – one attendee was happy to see that "alternative sports" facilities scored highly and wanted to make sure that BMX was a part of these alternative sports.

- Provide an adequate BMX facility to host events
- Public vs. private facilities were questioned more than once – is the county planning for facilities that directly compete with facilities and services offered in the private sector? Will the county be constructing ice rinks or archery ranges if these facilities occur in the private sector, to directly compete with these established businesses?
- One attendee supported walking trails and greenway trails, as well as family, neighborhood and passive parks.
- Move the remote-controlled car and plane facility to # 9 on the list.
- Design soccer facility so that multiple fields could be graded as a continuous surface to be used in times of the week/year that soccer games were not in progress. This open space could be used for gatherings, impromptu athletic events and passive recreation.
- Tammy Stout mentioned that the lighting at the current soccer fields was inadequate for nighttime play.
- County officials stated that they needed a soccer complex with multiple fields so that the county may host tournaments.
- Rails to Trails representative in the attendees stated that he would like to see more Rails to Trails projects in Columbia County – and more trails in general.
- Equestrian facilities should be added and planned for while land in the county is still available.
- Disc golf representative in attendance has met with Frank Neal and wants to partner with the county to construct a National Disc Golf Course in Wildwood Park. He brought a proposal to the meeting and gave copies to Columbia County officials and the planning team.
- Team with DOT officials to provide adequate bike lanes in roadways. Help to generate public support for sidewalks in the County Planning Commission meetings.
- County-owned and -operated golf course should be added to the system.

Programming issues:

- Special events were questioned – why was it so high on the list? The example given, “health fair” is a poor example... we explained that the special events category also included the Easter Egg hunts, Halloween festivals, car shows, boat shows, fishing tournaments, etc. The attendees seemed to agree that this should be high on the list.
- Community Arts Center programming should be included – with programming for the new theater in the library and amphitheater to generate interest in the parks department’s new offerings.
- One attendee wanted to see concerts for teens – and programming for teen activities.
- Programming for youth volleyball – the high schools have started volleyball recently and need a “feeder” system from the youth of Columbia County.
- More individual sports programming and less team sports programming.
- Expand youth sports to include gymnastics, volleyball, archery and golf education.
- Equestrian programming for trails, riding areas, possibly some instructional/ educational areas with stables, etc. The county should explore equestrian events that may be a source of funds generation.
- Hiking and biking programs should be explored.
- Alternative sports and teen programming need to be added.
- Road races – running events sponsored by the county.



- Provide programs that generate revenue for the parks department so that they may provide the community with free programs that are supported by these generated funds.

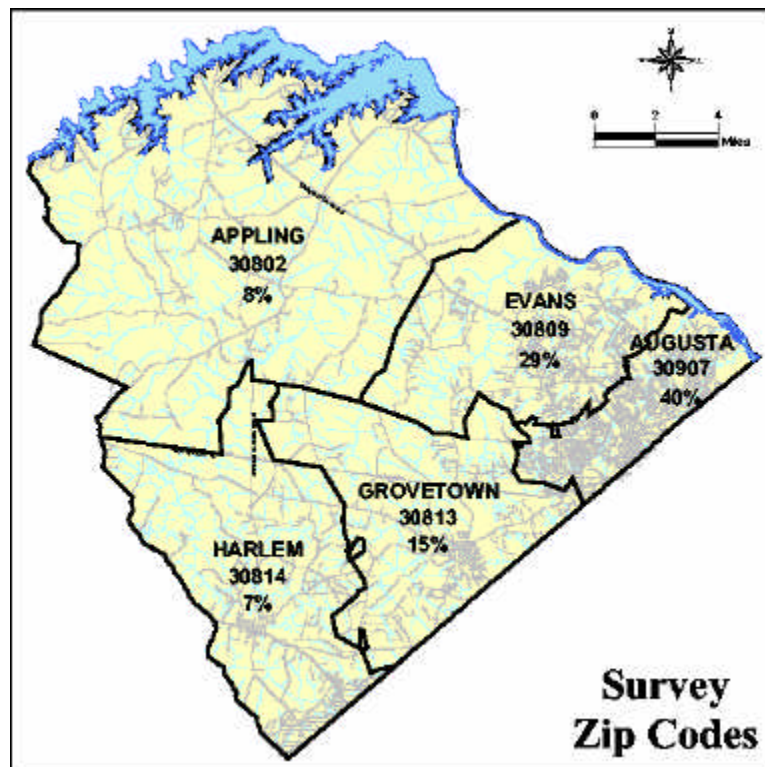
### ***Eubank Blanchard Community Center October 30, 2001***

General discussion:

- There needs to be more volunteer supervision for youth athletics.
- Less emphasis on winning and creating a super team to compete for the “world series” and more on fun, parity and teaching the fundamentals to all children.
- Supporting AAU (or travel teams) to give those desiring a higher level of competition an outlet without interfering with other recreation programs.
- Expand youth opportunities to individual sports.
- Add a competition pool facility in conjunction with a school.

### **User Survey**

Elected officials and staff are constantly challenged to respond to user needs—an effective method to identify priority needs is a user survey to provide feedback to community leaders. The survey developed for the Columbia County Parks and Recreation Master Plan consisted of 16 questions that tested the program and facility prioritization generated by the Citizens’ Steering Committee as well as issues identified by interviews and other sources. The document was mailed to a statistically valid sampling of 6,000 Columbia County residents selected randomly from a list of property owners provided by a Columbia County GIS database. The survey response rate was approximately nine percent. A geographic breakdown of the responding zip codes is shown below and an analysis of the survey responses follows. Actual survey questions are listed in boldface.



1. Listed below are current programs and activities typically offered by parks and recreation departments. Please indicate with a checkmark all of the programs and activities in which you or members of your family would be interested.

<b>Arts and Crafts</b>	<b>64%</b>	Tennis	21%
<b>Concerts in the Parks</b>	<b>56%</b>	Theater	20%
<b>Running/Walking</b>	<b>55%</b>	Senior Games	20%
<b>Swimming</b>	<b>37%</b>	Youth Football	20%
<b>Hiking</b>	<b>36%</b>	After School Programs	19%
<b>Horseback Riding</b>	<b>32%</b>	Indoor Volleyball	17%
<b>Swimming Lessons</b>	<b>32%</b>	Gymnastics	16%
<b>Playgrounds</b>	<b>29%</b>	Adult Softball	16%
<b>Weight Room</b>	<b>28%</b>	Karate	16%
<b>Golf Lessons</b>	<b>27%(tie)</b>	Youth Softball	15%
<b>Special Events</b>	<b>27%(tie)</b>	Drama Programs	15%
Golf	26%	Archery	14%
Youth Soccer	25%	Outdoor Volleyball	13%
Youth Baseball	25%	Softball Tournaments	13%
Boating	25%	Adult Basketball	11%
Tennis Lessons	24%	Soccer Tournaments	11%
Skate Park	24%	Cheerleading	10%
Dance	24%	Adult Soccer	7%
Youth Basketball	23%		

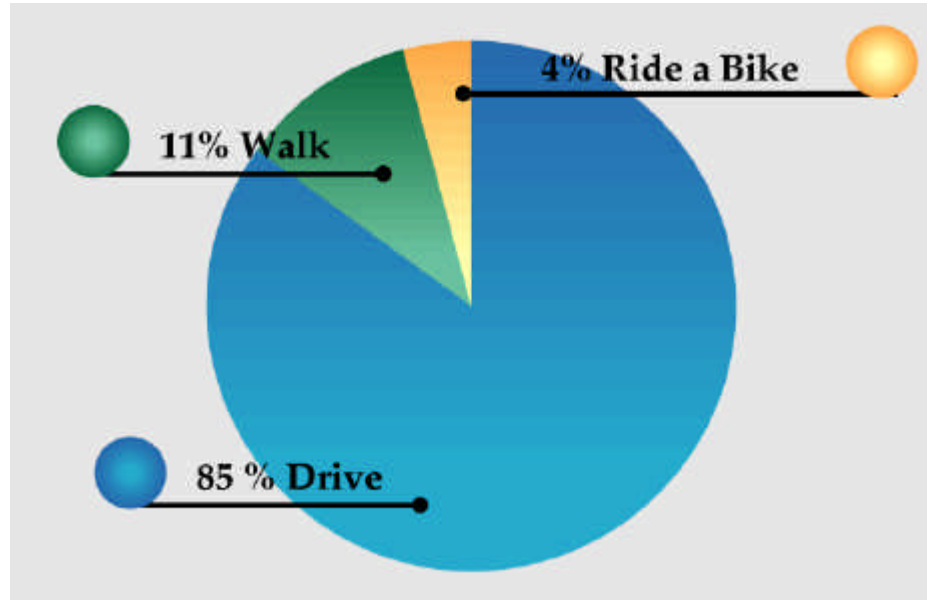
*The top ten activities respondents expressed interest in are identified in bold face on the above list. Arts and craft programs and classes generated the most interest (64%), followed closely by concerts in the parks (56%) and running/walking activities (55%). No single youth athletics program was listed in the top ten, but combined "youth athletics" would be a top ten activity.*

2. Indicate with a checkmark the facilities listed below that you think should be added to the Columbia County Park system:

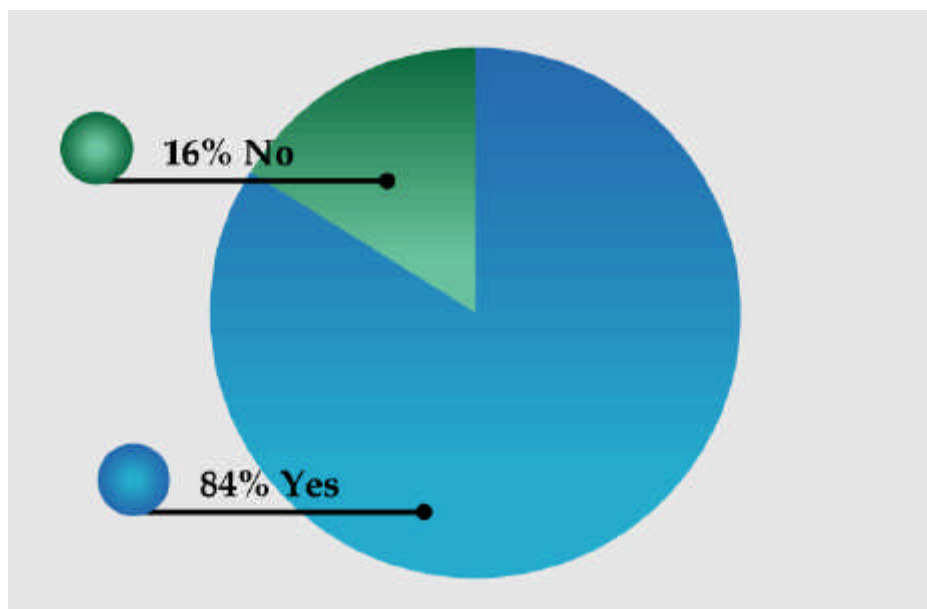
<b>Trails and Greenways</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Neighborhood Parks with Playgrounds</b>	<b>45%</b>
<b>Passive Parks – Natural Areas</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Picnic Pavilions</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>Improvements to Existing Parks</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Aquatic Center</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Community Playhouse and Concert Hall</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Civic Center</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Public Shooting Range</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Golf Course</b>	<b>19% (tie)</b>
<b>Equestrian Center</b>	<b>19% (tie)</b>
Improvements at Wildwood Park	18%
Ice Rink	15%
Archery Range	15%
Gymnastics Facility	14%
"Extreme" Sports Complex	13%
Soccer Complex	12%
Model Airplane Field	9%

*The respondents favor trails and greenways by a large margin over the next popular items, which also include passive recreation facilities. From both the surveys and public workshops, it is evident that the county is very interested in neighborhood parks and passive recreation elements that cater to individuals that are interested in recreation opportunities beyond athletic offerings.*

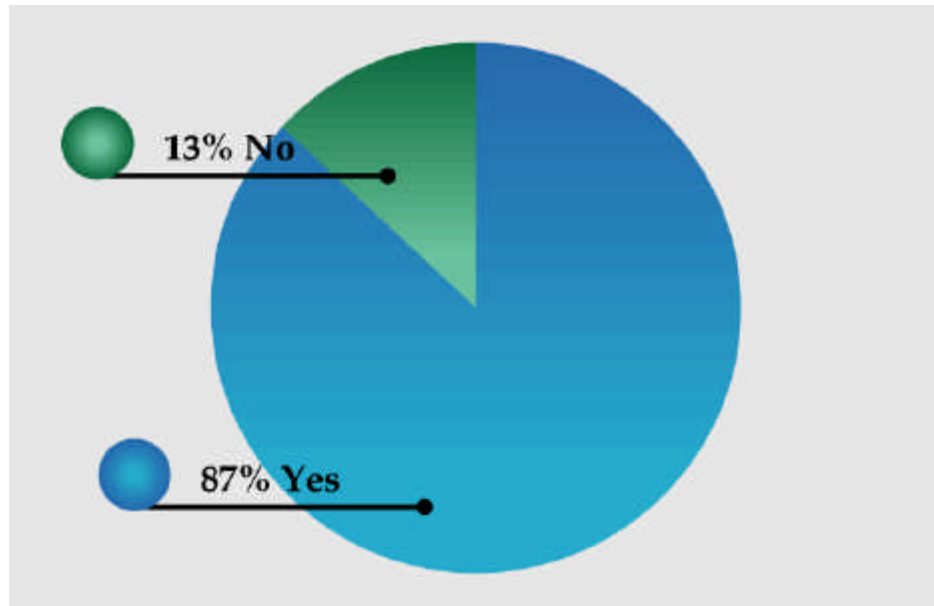
**3. Do you currently walk, drive, or ride a bike, to the park facility you use most often?**



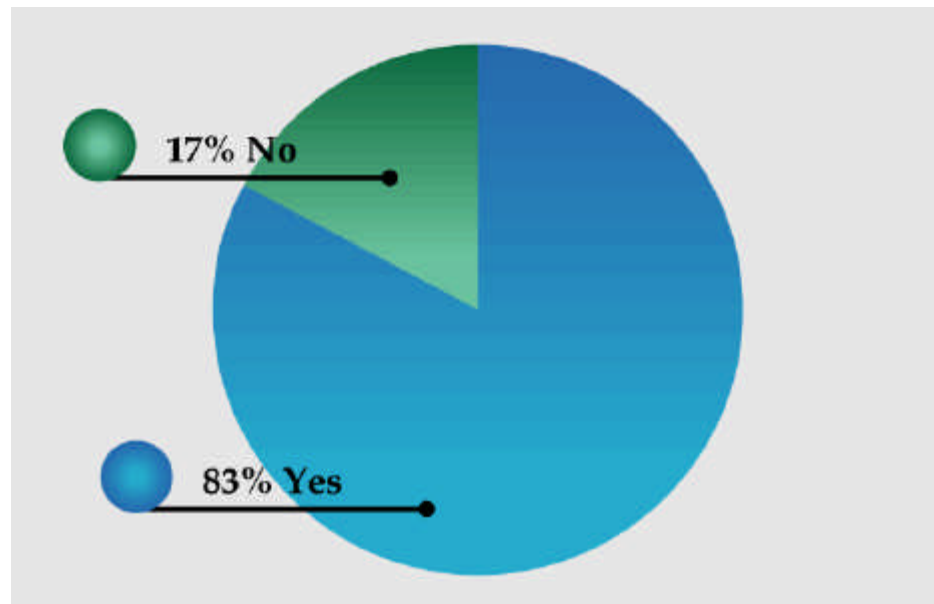
**4. Would you be likely to walk or ride a bike if safe trail routes were available to parks?**



5. Do you support the idea of allowing county owned land that is managed by the Recreation and Leisure Services Department to be set aside strictly for open space preservation and not be developed?

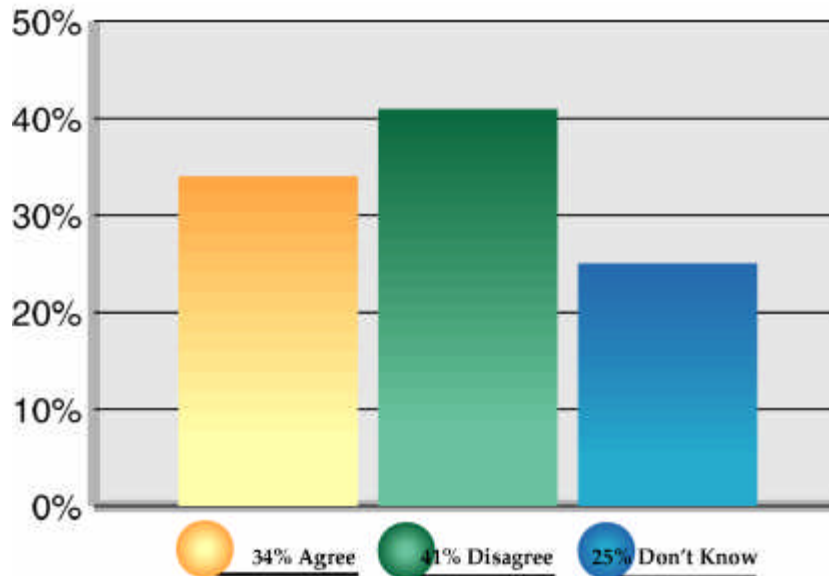


6. Would you use the Internet to access information about Parks and Recreation programs, schedules and facilities if a web site with regularly updated information were available?



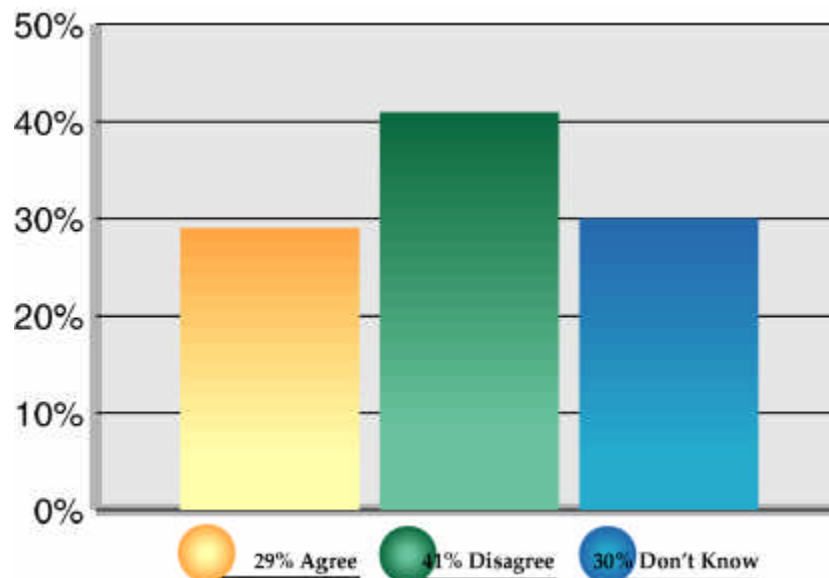
7. Please indicate with the appropriate number if you agree, disagree or don't know about the following statements:

a) Advertisements about upcoming events and programs are adequate.



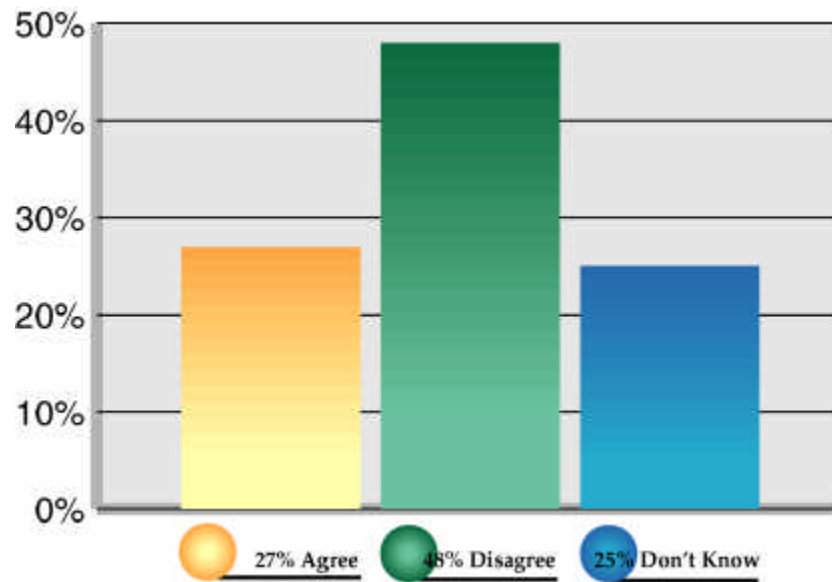
*Of the respondents that disagreed, many wrote in that they were unaware of parks department programming and events. Surprisingly, a large percentage (44%) of the respondents in the Evans area code (the area code where Patriots Park and the Parks and Recreation offices are located) felt that advertising was inadequate.*

b) The number of programs currently offered by the Recreation and Leisure Services Department adequately meets my family's needs.



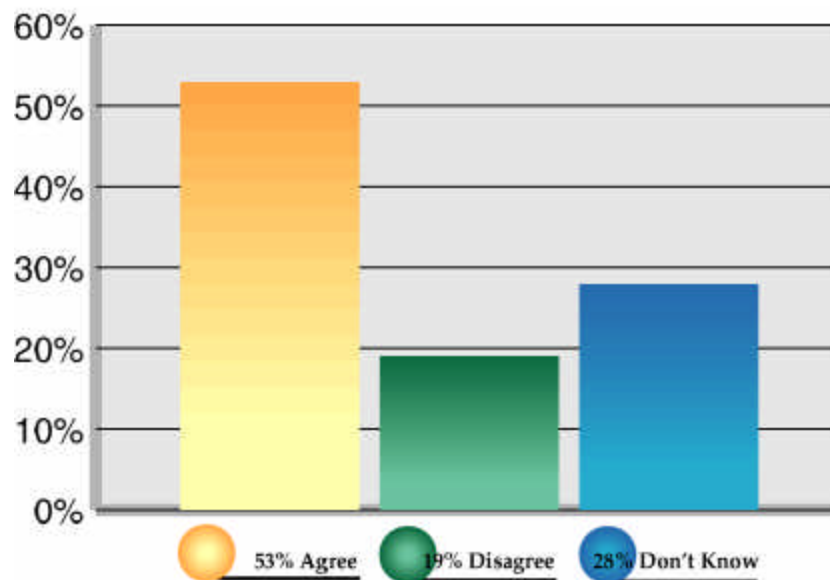
*The highest numbers of individuals agreeing with the statement reside in the northeast portion of the county (30907). Additional program options are clearly needed if 41% feel more diverse options are needed compared to just 29% who feel the number of programs is adequate.*

c) The types of programs currently offered by the Recreation and Leisure Services Department adequately meet my family's needs.



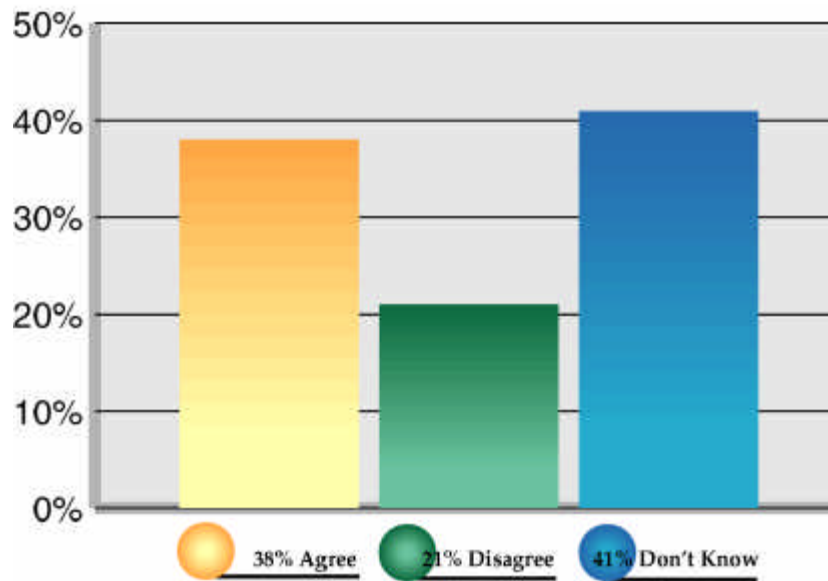
*The entire county had a very high ratio of 'Don't Know' and 'Disagree' responses to this statement, with a large number of these individuals in the northeastern most portion of the county. More diverse programs are needed to meet the public's demand for family recreation.*

d) Park and recreation facilities are open at times that meet my family's needs.



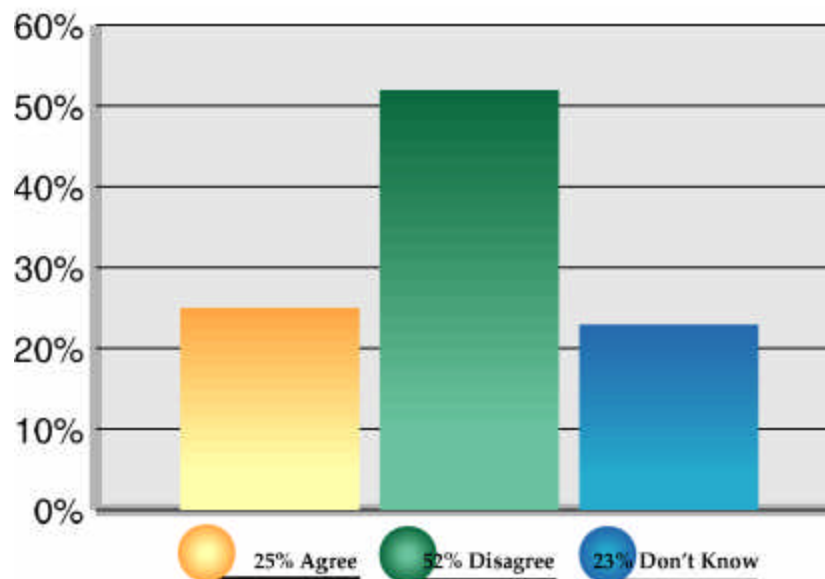
*A majority of the county feels that park hours are adequate to meet the demands of programs and activities.*

**e) Programs and leagues are offered at convenient times and locations**



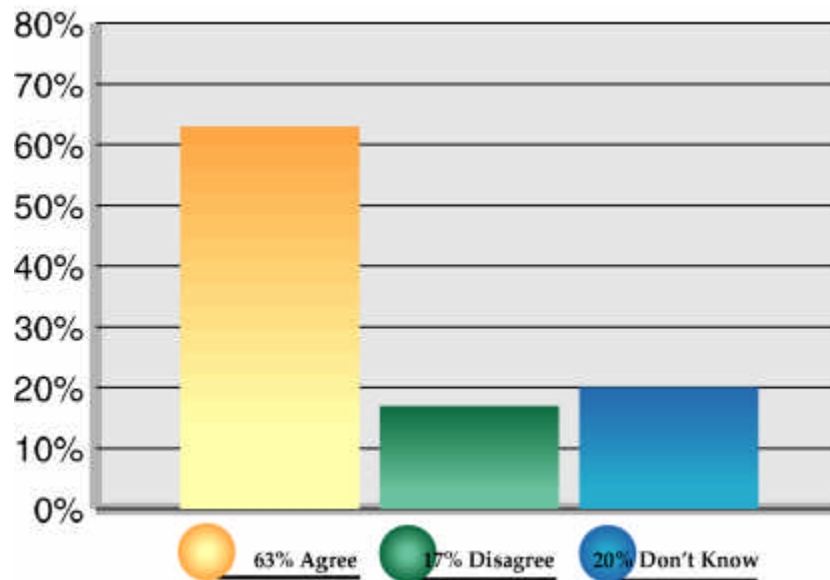
*Written comments from some individuals noted that scheduling for certain youth athletic programs were not scheduled prior to sign-up times and that the scheduling policies seemed “unorganized.”*

**f) Parks are well distributed throughout the county.**



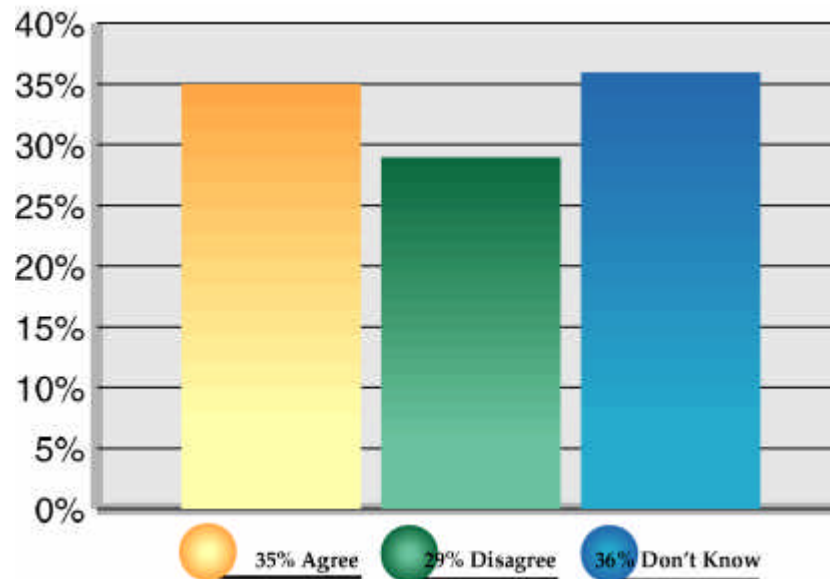
*Numerous individuals stated that the parks were not convenient in their area of the county and that there is a great need for smaller, neighborhood parks.*

**g) Existing recreation facilities and parks are well maintained.**



*Maintenance in the county does not appear to the individuals polled as a problem.*

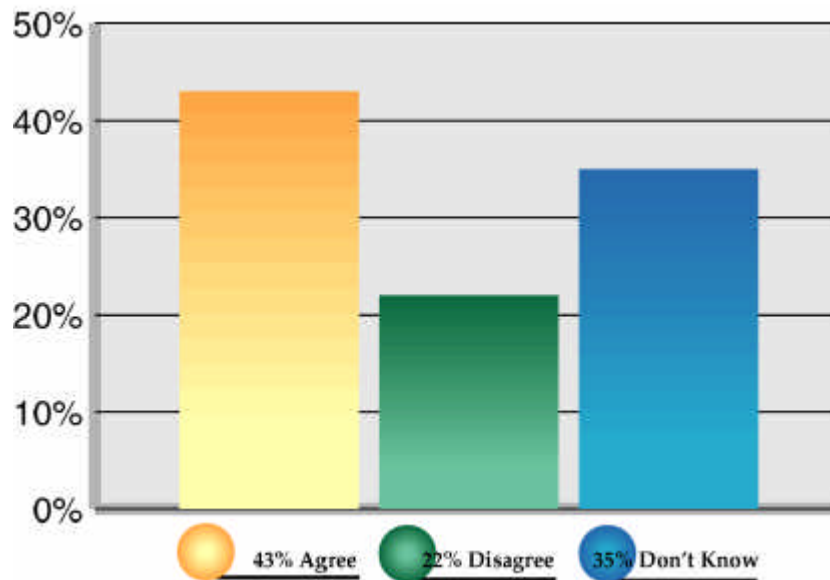
**h) Existing facilities need to be renovated.**



*Many written comments indicated that individuals did not know or were not aware of the county's need for park renovation. Other comments made by individuals indicated that they did not want to incur additional taxes in order to construct or renovate parks.*

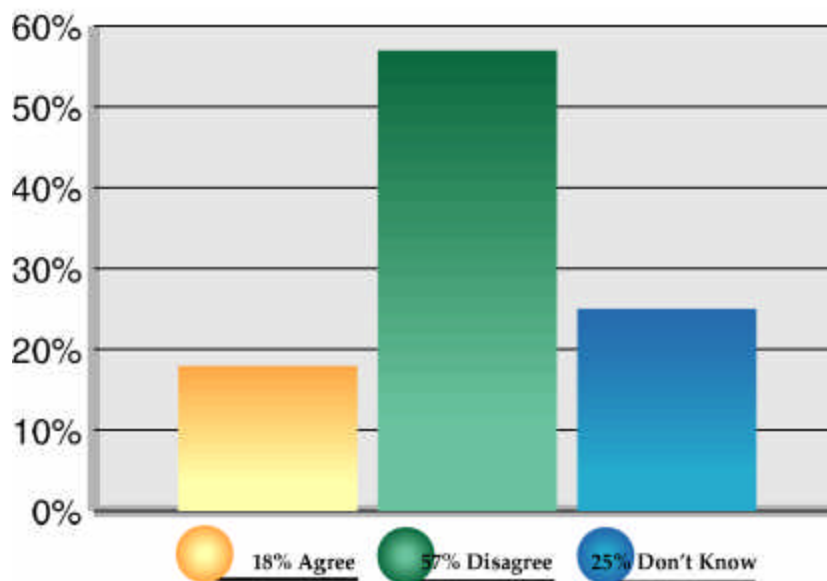


**i) Additional sports fields are needed.**



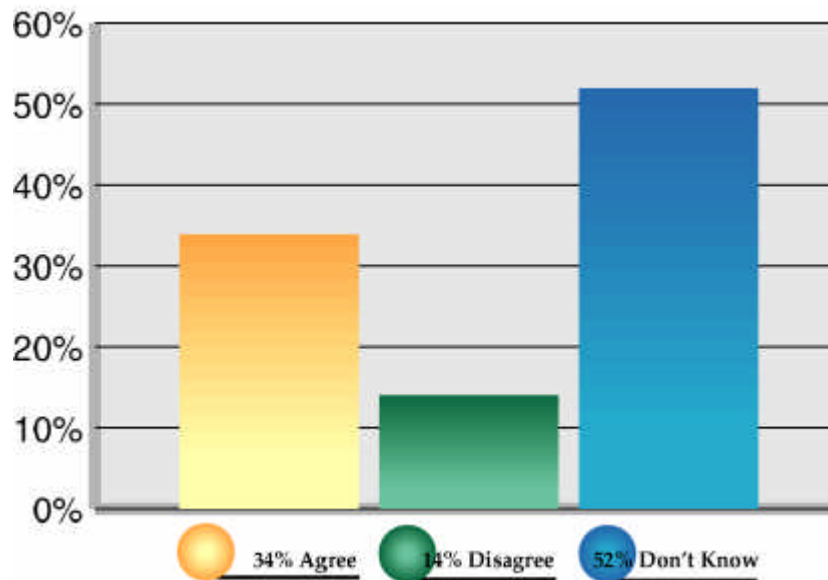
*The program and facilities survey results indicate that soccer fields are in higher demand, as are facilities that are located closer to the population centers. Other comments made by individuals indicated that they did not want to incur additional taxes in order to construct or renovate parks.*

**j) An adequate number of parks and facilities are available.**



*The highest percentages of individuals disagreeing with this statement reside in the northeast portion of the county (30907-62%). This reflects a lack of park facilities in that zip code area.*

**k) Sports leagues are well organized.**



*Overall, the survey respondents either had no children in league sports, were not aware of league sport offerings or were overall satisfied. See questions 8 and 9.*

**Do you feel there are adequate youth programs for both boys and girls offered through Parks and Recreation?**

Not sure, I am not involved in programs for youth.	51%
Yes, programs are adequate for boys and girls.	25%
Additional programs are needed for both boys and girls.	18%
No, additional programs are needed for girls.	5%
No, additional programs are needed for boys.	1%

*More than half of the survey respondents indicated that they are not involved in Columbia County's youth programs.*

*Responses identifying a need for additional programs for youth accounted for 24%. The greatest dissatisfaction with youth programs was in the eastern portions of the county, although this portion also was represented by the most respondents overall.*

*Respondents, in written responses, indicated programs such as gymnastics, swimming, volleyball and other sports alternates, as well as more passive recreation youth offerings and after school programs would be offerings that individuals would be interested in for the county's youth.*

**9. Do you feel there are adequate adult programs for men and women offered through Parks and Recreation? (Circle choice)**

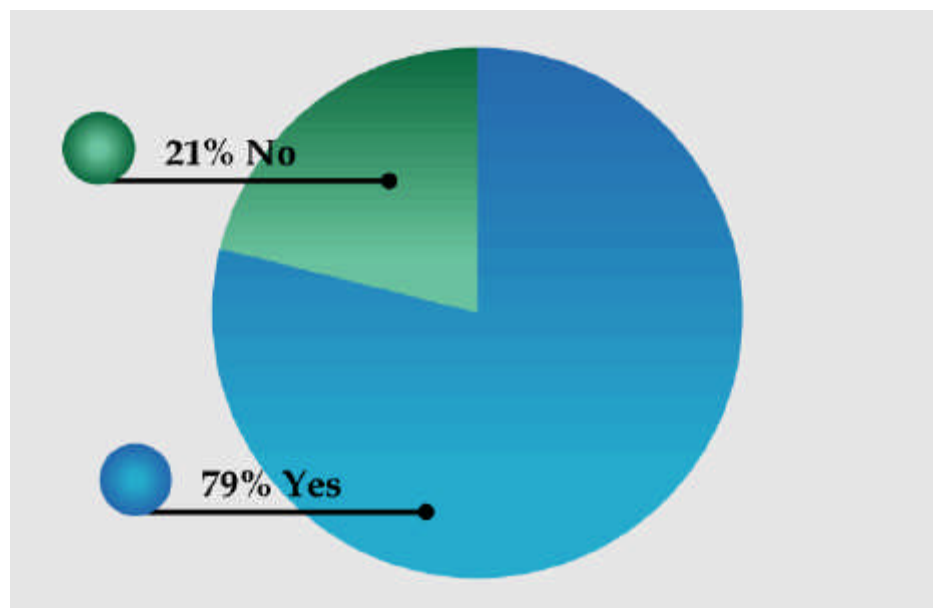
Not sure, I am not involved in programs for adults.	56%
Additional programs are needed for both men and women.	24%
Yes, programs are adequate for men and women.	11%
No, additional programs are needed for women.	6%
No, additional programs are needed for men.	3%

*Over one-half of the survey respondents reported that they do not participate in Columbia County's adult programs. Those who do not participate were evenly spread throughout the county, when comparing the percentage of respondents.*

*Responses indicating a need for additional adult programs accounted for 33% of those answering the question. Again, these figures were spread evenly over the county, but the highest numbers of respondents reside in the eastern portion of the county.*

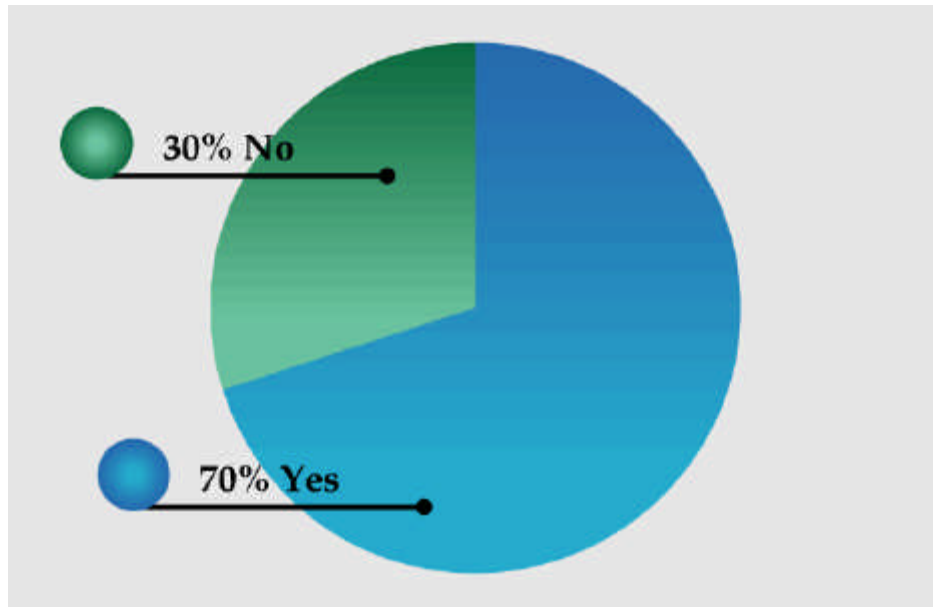
*Written comments in response to the question generally identified baseball, tennis, golf, soccer and numerous passive recreation activities.*

**10. Would you support increased county funding from current county revenues for Parks and Recreation?**



*Most respondents want the county to explore creative funding options for Parks and Recreation, not create new taxes.*

**11. Do you feel the Parks and Recreation office is conveniently located and easily accessible?**



*Many respondents wrote that they had no idea where the offices were, or that they assumed that the offices were in the Evans Government Center. Others wanted the park offices moved to locations near where they reside – Grovetown, Harlem, Appling, Blanchard, etc.*

**12. Please indicate by checking “yes” or “no” how you obtain information about upcoming programs and events that are offered by the Columbia County Recreation and Leisure Services Department.**

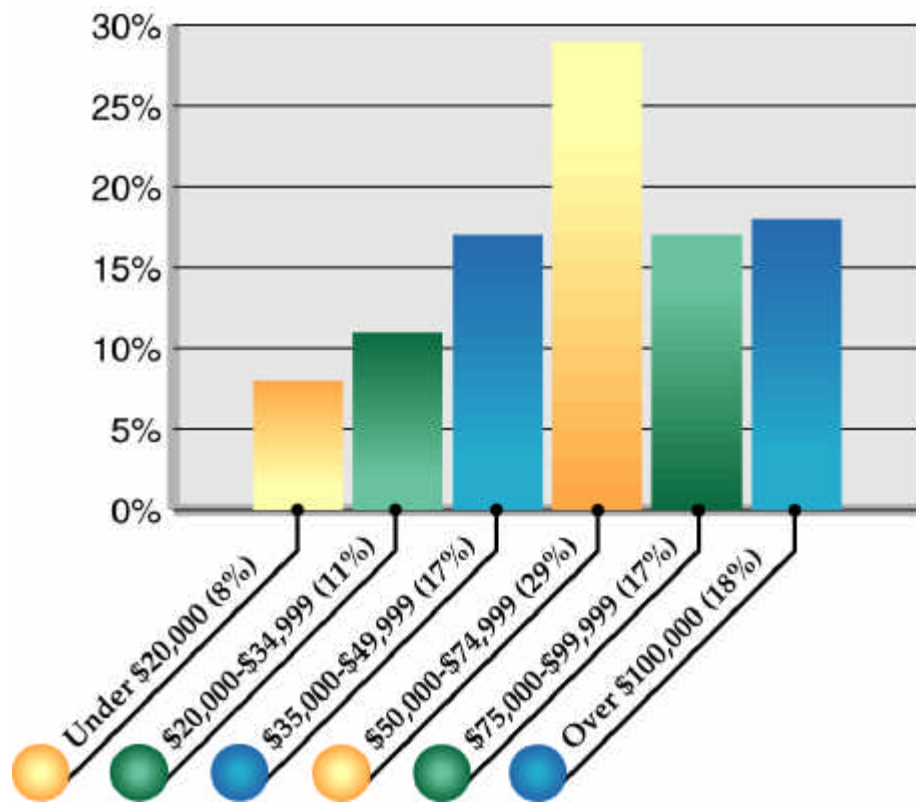
Local television channel	37%Yes	63%No
Radio	34%Yes	66%No
Handouts/fliers	43%Yes	57%No
Newspaper ads	61%Yes	39%No
E-mail	7%Yes	93%No
County website	17%Yes	83%No
Word of mouth (i.e. friends, neighbors, coaches, etc.)	67%Yes	33%No

*Identifying “word of mouth” as the most successful means of marketing programs and events suggests that current users are enthusiastic enough about the department’s offerings that they encourage friends and neighbors to participate. Newspaper, handouts, television and radio were ranked next, and seem somewhat effective across the county. The number of respondents that were not aware of park offerings noted that the advertisings did not give enough advance notice prior to events, did not advertise programs, or that they never received information about any parks department offerings.*

### 13. What is your age?

45-54	28%
35-44	27%
55-64	17%
65-74	12%
25-34	10%
75+	4%
15-24	1%
Under 15	1%

### 15. What is your total annual household income?



With 64% of the population having a family income of over \$50,000 and an additional 17% having an income between \$35,000 and \$49,999, it is clear that residents can be expected to pay a fair cost for programs provided by the county. The Recreation and Leisure Services Department should develop a fees and charges policy that takes a realistic look at the impact of the fees they charge, the ability of families with multiple children to pay the fees and the overall percentage of the budget that goes into subsidizing recreation programs. Columbia County should be able to justify fees that cover 35-50% of program operating costs for youth sports and 100% for adult sports and non-athletic programs.